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MR. JOHN BURNS, M.P.

Mr. John Burns, M.P.

By G. H. Knott, M.A.



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Henry J. Drane, Salisbury House, Salisbury
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—
1901.

THE following sketch of the career of Mr. John Burns is not intended to be either critical, laudatory, or denunciatory. It is simply a narrative, coloured with a certain, even a considerable, amount of sympathy with the personality and aim of its subject. General criticism of the social and political changes implied in the short word "Socialism" seemed unnecessary, and it is therefore not offered. The idea is amongst us, and it will triumph or die out, as other ideas have done, according to its destiny and whatever the arguments for or against it may be. Mr. Burns is a well-known man, who has been much talked and written about, owing to his association in Parliament and the Municipality with socialistic ideas. He has undoubtedly had considerable influence in public life during the last dozen years. It is very probable that a man of his ability and force of character will continue, and perhaps extend, this influence. In this is the sufficient reason for the narrative of biographical and other facts here presented. The laudation or the denunciation must be supplied by the reader.

CHRONOLOGY.

BORN 1858, at Vauxhall ; apprenticed himself as engineer ; visited Niger as foreman engineer, 1877-8 ; toured through France, Germany, and Austria, 1880 ; was defeated as Socialist candidate for Nottingham, 1885 ; conspicuous in unemployed agitation, 1886, and in the West-End riots of February, 1887 ; imprisoned in 1887 for resisting police in Trafalgar Square ; organised great Dock Strike, 1889 ; elected to the London County Council, 1889-92-95-98 ; M.P. for Battersea, 1892 ; re-elected 1895 and 1900.

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MR. JOHN BURNS, M.P.

CHAPTER I.

Introductory—Working-Class Leaders, Old and New—Preparing the Ground—Trade Unionism and Socialism.

THE issue of the great political and industrial revolutions during the nineteenth century may be described in one sentence: The labouring classes have become the masters of their own fortunes. It was only within ten years of the death of William Cobbett in 1835 that the laws forbidding the combination of workmen to raise their wages, or to alter the conditions of their employment were repealed. Cobbett was the old style of working man's leader. He was an agitator in politics, because a

long series of political measures had to be passed before working men were at liberty to apply themselves, under leaders of a new type, to the study of the economical questions with which they are now principally occupied. He was sixty years of age before he was able for the first time to enter Parliament. It was considered characteristic of his "matchless effrontery and impudence" that he had made an appeal to the public for £5000, in order that he might advocate the cause of reform in the House of Commons. After several unsuccessful efforts he succeeded, not because he had a constituency of working men who supported him, but through the influence of a Mr. Fielden who had the borough of Oldham pretty nearly under his control. He began his working life at as early an age and with as scanty an education as our labour leaders in these more recent

days have done ; his sympathies with poverty and hard lives were as keen ; he had devoted to the service of the oppressed and unfranchised working classes his great natural abilities and self-acquired education, which, without disparagement of his successors, were at least equal to theirs ; he was the ablest political pamphleteer and journalist of his day, with a style that makes his work, ephemeral though so much of it was, still readable as literature with that of Swift or Defoe, and yet he had to accept a pocket borough in the end. When pocket boroughs ceased to be, it became harder, if that be possible, for working-class leaders to represent the interests of their class in Parliament, and labour questions were more discussed and legislated upon, either by philanthropists or by manufacturers, who were bitterly hostile to labour

legislation, or by Tories, who gleefully took part in the fray to pay off old grudges against the Manchester school of Free Traders. Thirty-five years passed before the extension of the suffrage in boroughs enabled the great body of town labourers to act directly in political affairs, and forty years passed before the Ballot Act of 1872 secured their independence of action. The democratic political edifice may be considered as roughly completed in 1884 with the admission of the agricultural labourer to full citizenship. We are not concerned here with further electoral reforms which, though they might affect the working classes more directly, would affect at the same time other classes along with them. What we want to show is, that until the labouring classes obtained political enfranchisement their representation in Parliament by their own class

fellows was impossible. When that was achieved, and the property qualification for members of Parliament was abolished, as it was in 1858, then came the rise of that new brand of member known as the Labour representative, of whom John Burns, whose interesting and strenuous career we are about to relate, is at the present time the most widely known and the most distinguished.

But there is another side of English life to which we must turn if we would understand the heritage from which the working classes were for many generations excluded, and to which they have been fully restored once more only within the last half-dozen years. In 1837 the towns were handed back to their inhabitants, and the corrupt oligarchies that had stifled the free life of the municipalities were superseded by the reformed corporations

that have played so important a part, and are destined to an ever-increasing importance, in the government of England. There was one exception, and the "corrupt oligarchy" of the city of London remained. We are not concerned to discuss here how long and to what extent "corruption" remained in the veins of the "city" while the fresh blood was rushing vigorously through the vessels of the reformed corporations. The "city" remains, but there is now the County Council of the greater London and the twenty-eight new boroughs constituted on the broad lines of the democratic municipalities of the provincial towns. Whether the extraordinary dissection of the metropolis is or is not a retrograde step in municipal government, whether it is or is not destined to be permanent, it is not in our plan to consider. We are only directing attention

to the fact that in provincial municipal life and in metropolitan municipal life, as well as in the government of the counties and parishes by the Local Government Act, 1889, and the Parish Councils Act, 1894, the control by the masses of the people of their local interests has been immensely extended, and opportunities of public activity have been afforded them from which they were previously excluded. Here, again, as in Imperial political life, we have John Burns, the hero of our story, representing, in its highest development, the *rôle* that working men have been enabled to play in the local government of the country by the reform of municipal and county institutions.

Throughout all this period the working classes had been acquiring political and social education from many sources. Their organisation into

trade unions was the most fruitful. The unions stimulated the leaders of working men in the middle of the century to consider economical questions and the actual management of corporate property, and the guidance of combined movements of workmen for improving their industrial position gave them a practical training in affairs which was a better preparation for politics than the ordinary middle class member of Parliament ever gets, or even those who, by the advantages of birth, are hereditary Cabinet ministers. In spite of the general absence of provision for the education of the working classes, the stress of economical and social questions so acted upon its better members that there was never a time more fertile in a splendid race of self-educated men than the period when the trade unions were fighting for existence and power. While

working men were establishing trade unions, co-operative societies, building societies, and mechanics' institutes, they were reading Adam Smith, Owen, and Mill, and their theoretical creation was going on side by side with their increasing practical capacity. This training they were getting for forty years ; they influenced politics indirectly before they received political enfranchisement ; they were prepared to influence it more directly when they entered into the circle of the governing classes. But there is this further to be noted : the unique combination of theory and practice in economics had this for result, that the working classes were the first of the classes to discover that there was something wrong in the old doctrines of the "classical economists." The experience of John Burns, when on the Niger he read that famous chapter of Mill on Communism, and was

converted to a positive and reasoned belief in Socialism from a mere general impression and vague consciousness of something being wrong—that is the history of a good many other readers of the literature of Socialism which was finding its way from Germany, and the teaching of Lassalle, Marx, and others, and beginning to supersede, not only the “classical economists,” but to make obsolete most of the academic and philanthropic Socialism of the older writers and founders of so-called socialistic communities, such as St. Simon, Fourier, and Owen. Amongst other signs of the times were the establishment of the Social Democratic Federation in 1880, the publication of Henry George’s “Progress and Poverty,” the founding of the Fabian Society in 1883. Trade unionism in its earliest stages had demanded State help for accomplishing many of the

objects it desired ; later it had seemed to acquiesce in the fashionable economics of *laissez faire*, and its leaders, many of them admirable men, were as extreme individualists as Richard Cobden or John Bright and other Manchestrans. But there now arose the new Trade Unionism, permeated by Socialist doctrine and with a wider programme for introducing State and municipal action into industrial operations. The ideal trade union leader was no longer to limit his efforts to the individualistic struggle between his trade and his employer, but to seek, by action in Parliament and on local bodies, to affect the whole conditions of industry and advocate any and every proposal that had relation to the improvement of the life of the working classes. Being now within the constitution, these classes decided that they had in the constitutional

political lever the instrument by which they could influence legislation and State action to realise their economical ideas. They gave up the *rôle* of revolutionists—if they had ever wished to play it—of impracticable idealists, of extremists. In their Trade Union Congresses, which for over thirty years have kept their principles and aims so conspicuously before the public, to the advantage alike of themselves and the public, their programmes have been at times too advanced for immediate adoption; but their attitude may now be defined very much in the language of the Fabian Society's policy as a recognition of the fact that neither Socialists nor other people can have their own way in everything, but must compromise as a necessary condition of political progress.

John Burns is the very embodiment of this new school. His career

is typical of it. His success indicates its possibilities. He illustrates it in his career as Trade Unionist, County Councillor, and Member of Parliament. "Mr. Burns, you have not said much about theoretical Socialism lately, have you?" asked a friend. "No," was the reply, "I have been putting it into the form of bricks and mortar." This saying is eminently characteristic of Burns the idealist, the practical man, and the man of literary and oratorical gifts, who loves to say good things as he loves to do great ones. The combination implies a rare capacity, wherever it is found, of statesmanship and leadership, given the opportunity.

CHAPTER II.

John Burns' Early Life—Victor Delahaye, the Refugee Communard — Work on the Niger : Two Anecdotes — Return to England and “Demagogy.”

IN a room at 108 Lavender Hill, Battersea, hangs a beautiful engraving of Nasmyth's portrait of Robert Burns. When you become acquainted with the first fact about John Burns, that his father was an Ayrshire man, it is inevitable that you ask, as you note the general resemblance of his contour with that of the poet, and mark the brilliant dark eyes and black hair suggestive of the imaginative and artistic strain—Is Burns the “demagogue” descended from the demagogue poet who wrote “A man's a man for a' that”? John Burns, with that adherence to fact which distinguishes him, pleases himself with the probability, but remarks

suggestively that the genealogy has not actually been made out. When Mr. Burns becomes (a reformed) Lord Mayor of London, perhaps the pedigreeists will help him. If he has not a drop of English blood in his veins he was born in London—quarter Battersea—where he has lived the whole of his life since his birthday in 1858, and this quarter he has represented in the County Council of London and the Imperial Parliament since 1889 and 1892 respectively. Two years before the Elementary Education Act, 1870, was passed, as a lad of ten he was working in a candle factory. Weird though the story seems, it is a fact that at twelve he was a page-boy in buttons; probably, however, in no aristocratic or “capitalist” service; or, if so, he at anyrate ran no risk with his temperament of becoming a “pampered menial.” He had been to

school, but it hardly needs saying that his education was not of the kind usually prescribed for members of Parliament or even County Councillors. That he had to begin working so soon is accounted for by the widowhood of his mother; and it also happened that, such as his education was, it was interfered with by his having, in various casual employments by day or in the evening, to help his mother in bearing the burden of their poverty.

From fourteen to twenty-one was the real period to which we must look for the development of Burns' character. It is the period of his apprenticeship as an engineer. It was then that his bias showed itself. Ambitious youths of his class take to reading, and they read because they have been quick to see and to feel the disadvantages of their social position. They want to find a remedy, and they think they will find

it in books. They are not merely "fond of reading" in the ordinary sense; they read with an object. Burns was in an atmosphere of conflict between the workman and the employer. Would he not read Ruskin and Carlyle? Of course he would, and put the dots on their "i's" from his own experience. What was it but the discontent of a superior mind that made him prowl around the New Cut picking up such cheap copies as he could afford to buy: "Owen's New Moral World," or whatever of the sort he might chance upon? Then as a Scotchman he was a born controversialist, and nature had endowed him with magnificent strength of body and lungs and a resonant voice. Inevitably he would see "tyrannies" that he would die rather than submit to—scale would matter not, it was the "principle." Then would come the street corner or

the Clapham Common oration, and the appetite for exercise of powers would grow by what it fed on. This was what happened. For one of his protests his indentures were cancelled, but restored. In this time, too, he made acquaintance with Socialism—French Socialism, that of the Communists of the terrible year 1870. Victor Delahaye was a refugee Communard, and the chances of work threw them together, with the result that they joined their forces in making telegraph writing instruments. Later, when the name of John Burns was used as a bogey in the West-End, and he was reported to be marching on London like a modern Jack Cade at the head of 60,000 men, it was all accounted for by the pernicious teaching of the revolutionary Delahaye. Now, Burns wrote a beautiful little obituary notice of this Delahaye, whose portrait is that

of an intellectual and refined idealist. Burns speaks of him thus—"He settled in London, worked in several of its shops, and made himself immensely popular by the simplicity of his character, the breadth and good-humoured tolerance of his disposition. I was privileged to be one of his most intimate friends, and worked with him under conditions that enabled me to realise the value to labour of such a man. One of the formative influences of my own life, a centre of inspiration to all around him, a repository of experience and knowledge, he was always available for any service that progress claimed for him. He was frequently entrusted by the French Government with commissions to study and report upon the labour question in many countries, and was a member of the Berlin Conference on Labour. In his researches into the economic and

social conditions of the industrial classes he was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour, and was justly esteemed by students who have in modern times been straightening the path for the ever-victorious army of labour to follow. His friend always, his pupil often, his admirer ever, his mourner now, I take the opportunity of testifying our sincere regret for the death of our brother member, Victor Delahaye, than whom labour never had a better soldier, nor society a better champion, nor the poor of all countries a better friend." This much for Victor Delahaye ; but, we may ask, Where did Burns learn to write English? Is there any more eloquent testimony to the education that he had been giving himself by the reading of great books in his earlier years than the fact that he was able to express so pathetically and purely and lucidly this

regret for his friend? Such English is hardly taught in our Board schools.

At twenty-two Burns was married, and he was for ever precluded from denouncing the bad economics of the working classes in marrying early. But there is reason to believe he is not "sound" on this point owing to a happy experience. As the tale is told we tell it. There happened a brush with the police on Clapham Common—a foretaste of Trafalgar Square—and the orator was marched off, "flushed with the struggle, and with his clothing torn and disordered." In the crowd was "a certain pretty young woman named Charlotte Gale, the daughter of a Battersea shipwright." That was the first meeting of the hero and heroine of a love story begun, continued, and not yet ended, though the moment is long since past when the love story of fiction usually finishes. In the house at

Lavender Hill a youngster of five, as stalwart as the father and as fair as his mother, completes the story which began on Clapham Common.

To return to more prosaic details which fall into their place before his marriage and fill the period from 1877 to 1878. The scene is the West African Coast, the Delta of the Niger at Akassa, where he went as foreman engineer to the Niger Company, and, as he will tell you, a servant of the Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain, who was a large shareholder in the company. Since those days Africa has become a more popular subject than it was then, but Burns observed many things there of which he subsequently made use in speeches on the South African question. Even economical questions were illuminated by his Niger experience. "You talk of savagery, and misery, and slavery," says he, as we pass by a

group of houses on the line between Battersea and Waterloo Station. "There is more of all three, and more degradation of women than you will see on the West Coast of Africa." Then he had taken his copy of Mill's "Political Economy," and he shows you the besmeared and stained volume, and turns up the chapter on Communism which, as we have said, converted him to Socialism. Political economy in the Tropics seems incongruous, but very curiously it happened at Akassa, that under the foundation of an old engine shop, and buried in the ground, he found a still more dilapidated copy of Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations," and read it.

Not everybody admires Socialists or Socialism, but all admire pluck and resource—qualities, both mental and physical, that Burns has shown throughout his life. His exhibition of them

in West Africa is only in a more unaccustomed scene than Trafalgar Square, or the East London Docks, or the Old Bailey Dock. Seven years ago Mr. John Parkin told in the *Engineers' Gazette* some of his experiences on the Niger. He tells how he was in danger from a large snake, and took to his heels. "I was soon arrested in my inglorious flight by the derisive laughter of a fellow engineer, who, with characteristic pluck and presence of mind, picked up a shovel and chased the serpent that was chasing me, and with a well-aimed blow cut it in two." That daring engineer, says Mr. Parkin, was John Burns, now L.C.C. and M.P. for Battersea.

Again, "This was not the only occasion on which Burns showed his intrepidity. One day he and I were returning from Brass River through the creeks in the steam launch. The propeller had only

two blades, which were dovetailed into the boss. They worked loose and fell off. The situation was alarming, as we were near a small village inhabited by cannibals, whilst the creek was swarming with sharks and reptiles. Fortunately the creek was not deep, it being low tide. The bottom was composed of soft stinking mud and decayed vegetable matter, so we had faint hopes of finding either of the blades. I proposed testing my skill as a diver, but Burns would not hear of it. 'No,' said he, 'you are married and I am single; if either of us risks his life, I'm the man,' and immediately stripping, he plunged in. To my delighted surprise he found one blade, and we managed to fix it in the boss, and proceeded very gingerly on our course, and arrived at Akassa in safety, though several hours late. We had been a long time without food, and were

ravenously hungry. Both of us did our duty at the table, but I was 'not in it with Burns, who ate nearly the entire leg of a goat.' It was during the same year too that, while on the sick list, he jumped from the poop of the steamer and rescued the cook, who had fallen overboard into the sea." With these samples of his adventures we end the African experiences. He returned to England at twenty with a hundred pounds; resumed the "demagogy" that led to Clapham Common and the marriage we have spoken of; went, after the honeymoon, for a six months' tour through France, Germany, and Austria, sight-seeing and studying the foreign workmen and their conditions; returned and, the period of preparation being over, settled down to the work of his life, as will be subsequently related, meanwhile for six or seven years labouring "with his own

hands" at his trade, until it occurred to a sensible section of working men that it is not good economy to kill their prophet if £2 a week will keep him alive.

CHAPTER III.

Organising Labour — The Champion of the
Unemployed — The Trafalgar Square
Trouble—Socialism from the Dock.

WE may ask here, Why should John Burns from 1880 to 1889, a young married man, a clever workman, with brains and strength that would have made for him a fortune, choose, instead of attending to his business, to work incessantly the various agitations which covered that period up to the great Dock Strike of 1889? What was it? The enthusiasm of humanity, ambition, or some other motive or motives? The fact is, a Hampden of the village or of the Empire is a psychological mystery. Why patriots or politicians should scorn delights and live laborious days is a standing puzzle to the man of ordinary human nature who loves to attend to his own interests and follow

his own ease. Lord Salisbury or Lord Rosebery, Mr. Chamberlain or Mr. John Burns, are all equally difficult of analysis. If ambition meant in Burns' case to get into Parliament, it was certainly not that. If it meant the crave for impressing his fellows with his personality, of guiding and governing them, of making himself notable, of exercising his great gifts for the pleasure that gives to men of the class we have mentioned, then we get some explanation. We may be sure, too, that he has the rare temperament of the man that can become as wroth over injustice done to the public as over a personal injury to himself, and who, once he has convinced himself of wrongs to be righted, will set about the work and continue in it, his enthusiasm for humanity being greatly reinforced by native obstinacy, dogged will, and a whole category of other egoistical

feelings. But let us distrust our analysis if we can only explain a career like John Burns' by imputing a still lower range of motives.

Burns began his work in Battersea, and preached Socialism, and organised the labourers with the intention of capturing the local authorities and manning them with his disciples. It was his jumping-off place. He began there putting his theories into practice; he learnt the art of popular oratory while he was learning and teaching what he had learned of municipal government, and what were its possibilities as a field of practical Socialism. By 1884 his fame had spread beyond the boundaries of Battersea. He made certain speeches in that year at the Industrial Remuneration Conference in London, and they cost him his situation. For seven weeks he was one of the unemployed, of whose cause

he was soon to be the recognised champion. That was becoming the problem of the time, and though the great Dock Strike did not occur till 1889, it was during the years 1884, 1885, and 1886 that Burns had commenced as part of his work of propagandism what he calls his crusade among the dockers. "A crusade of the dawn; for we (John Williams and Burns) did our haranguing amongst the men in the hours of the morning before their work hours had commenced. I myself, with my wife, have frequently left home at three and four o'clock in the morning, winter and summer; tramped to the docks, made speeches at three different gates, and returned to begin my day's work in the West-End at seven or eight o'clock. I have done this for weeks and months together. I was doing it at intervals through the years

1884, 1885, and 1886." It was this propaganda during years of great distress, when, too, the leaven of Socialism was, as we have pointed out, working in thousands of brains that are sluggish enough in time of prosperity, which Burns pushed with all his energy and strength of mind, body, and tongue, until he became one of the best known figures in the seething mass of unsatisfied labour. The "unemployed" reached the dimensions of a class, a fifth estate in the British constitution, and Burns of Tower Hill, the "man with the red flag," was its leader and prophet, appealing to the Government and to the local authorities for assistance by setting the unemployed to work—a doctrine for which he could quote the original intention of the English poor law to establish a working day of eight hours, and otherwise to abandon their passive attitude in face

of the destitution and misery that prevailed. To the men themselves he preached the doctrine of the reconstitution of society on a basis where men should receive the full value of their labour—"in short, society should be regarded as something more than a few titled non-producers who take the whole of the wealth which the useful workers alone produce." Other advisers of working men had a different programme. Messrs. Peters, Kelly Kenney, and Ternan, for example, were telling them that free trade was ruining them, and they were working what in 1886 was a much more palatable movement to the traders than Socialism—the Fair Trade movement. This "arrant imposture," as Burns deemed it, came to a head, and disappeared at the same time with the famous affair of 8th February, 1886, in Trafalgar Square, which led to Burns' appearance, with

three other Social Democrats, at the Old Bailey on a charge of sedition, conspiracy, and rioting. A Fair Trade meeting was called in the Square, and Burns went there to move an amendment, or to hold a meeting of his own if that were not allowed. There were 13,000 or 14,000 persons present, and Burns was hoisted on to the plinth of Nelson's Monument, and made a speech ending with a resolution of the Social Democratic Federation. Then the Fair Traders came, but their meeting proved abortive before the superior attractions of the Burns programme and the Burns oratory. There was no incitement to violence, but by the time the opposition meeting was over the Fair Traders' platforms were being upset; and to avoid further danger Burns started off with his followers in procession through the West-End to Hyde Park. The procession got as

far as the Carlton Club peacefully. Burns' description of what followed is from his Old Bailey speech. He reminded the jury that "there is a class of men who make a practice on occasions of political demonstrations to laugh and jeer from their club windows at the poverty of what they term the 'great unwashed.'" This, he said, happened at the Carlton Club, and stone-throwing began as the result of the "stupid, ungentlemanly, criminal conduct of the Carlton Club members." Then it went on "right up St. James' Street and down Piccadilly, and riot, if you define riot as the breaking of windows, was supreme. I was unable to check it. The fault was not mine." From the Achilles Statue in Hyde Park Burns and his friends—Champion, Williams, and Hyndman—called on their followers to discontinue the outrages, and the meeting then quietly dispersed.

The charge against Burns and his fellows could not be sustained, and they were acquitted. Seditious conspiracy, as he pointed out in his speech, was a ridiculous charge in the circumstances; and all his evidence showed that the accused had done all they could to stop disorder. An interesting part of the trial is that Mr. Ruskin, who had been near the Square, voluntarily offered himself as a witness on Burns' behalf. Two other details may be mentioned to illustrate Burns' life at this time and his characteristic aplomb. After the meeting at the Achilles Statue the newspapers placarded the streets with the announcement that John Burns was marching on London from Deptford at the head of 60,000 men. What was happening was this. Burns had only twopence in his pocket, and he had gone down to Hoe's machine shops, and was there waiting

to pick up a job. When the warrant was issued for his arrest, Inspector Littlechild drove to Lavender Hill in a cab. He was met accidentally by Burns, who hailed the cab and asked him if he was going to Lavender Hill. The Inspector said he was, but asked him what he had to do with it. "Only this, I am John Burns, and you had better arrest me now." He did so, and the two went off together without the warrant having even been read.

Trafalgar Square, however, was again to be the scene of another important event in Burns' stormy career. Meetings in connection with the unemployed agitation continued to be held from time to time up to October of 1887. The West-End tradesmen and others disliked them the more they saw of them, for very intelligible reasons, after the affair of February. The right to hold meetings there was denied, and

the Home Secretary and Sir Charles Warren, the Chief of Police, assumed the power of issuing proclamations to prohibit them. In November, 1887, the Coercion Act in Ireland and William O'Brien's breechless condition was exciting much sympathy in many enthusiastic circles, and a meeting—not of Socialists or of unemployed in particular—was announced to be held in the Square to consider the question. The right of free speech seemed to Burns to be at stake if Trafalgar Square were closed, and free speech for proclaiming injustices and claiming rights was the first essential for the mission of his life. Trafalgar Square, too, was the finest site in Europe for demonstrating, and he believed there was a police conspiracy against all demonstrations such as he was associated with both there and elsewhere; he could give plenty of instances in proof. Sir Charles

Warren represented a tyranny against which he was bound to protest. It was all very well to advise him and his followers to go to Hyde Park, but he had the answer that, twenty years ago, Mr. Walpole, the Tory Home Secretary, said it was inexpedient that meetings should be held there; let people hold their meetings in Trafalgar Square if they are legal and peaceably conducted. "Sir," Burns said, "if you prohibit us from the Square you will soon revive the Walpolean arguments against Hyde Park and the other parks too." Thus came about "Bloody Sunday," when the police, exasperated and wearied by a long series of troublesome experiences, turned on the crowd attempting to force its way into the Square and bludgeoned right and left unmercifully, with the result that two men were killed and hundreds savagely beaten. Burns and Cunninghame-Graham, who

had met casually, forced their way arm in arm into the Square, the only two, not without being severely handled, and were taken into custody, and, shortly, for space forbids more detail, were ultimately charged at the Old Bailey with rioting and holding an unlawful assembly. Burns' speech was a finer performance than his previous one from that place, where, as he mentioned, Lord Erskine had years ago successfully defended popular rights and liberties; but the most noticeable feature of it is that it is very little occupied with the events of "Bloody Sunday." He argued the legal point of the prohibition skilfully, and derided the charge of "being armed and causing a riot," when, as he said, his only arms were a pocket-handkerchief and a tramway ticket. His speech was an able presentation of the case for Socialism, and a pathetic statement of

the hard conditions of the labouring classes. Notwithstanding what had happened, he had no bitterness against the police: feminine spitefulness has no place in Burns' disposition. "I would try by education to win them over to my principles, and seek their co-operation as fellow-workmen in trying to remove those inequalities which their occupation brings them face to face with daily. The causes that make them sell their physical ability are the same that drive them into the army, that fill the streets with groups of unemployed workmen—want of work, or work at unremunerative wages. These causes the unemployed meetings want to mitigate. As a Socialist, I want to remove these causes." In another passage he said—"These men, the unemployed, have taught the politician the very elements of government: how to organise society

during the transitional period from the present competitive system, where the policeman is absolutely necessary, to the co-operative system, where the teacher will take his place." The result of the trial was the conviction of Burns and Cunninghame-Graham, and their sentence to three months' imprisonment, which they served in Pentonville. "Imprisonment," says Burns, "is a test that a man is in earnest." If we have to record that from this time forward no more was heard of meetings in Trafalgar Square, we may suppose that Burns and his party had lost their labour, and, in fact, free speech did not expire under the truncheons of the police. So we might ask—What profit had Burns of all his labour under the sun? There is an answer which is good for this and many other similar cases, namely, that a technical victory in the Law Courts is often a point where

the Government turns its face in an opposite direction and finds its victory null. Not to multiply instances, ship money had to be paid, said the Courts, but the feeling that had led to refusal to pay it ultimately triumphed; and after any real popular protest things hardly ever can be again what they were before it was made. Burns not long after he came out of prison was in the County Council, and not long after that in Parliament, and both places, especially the former, were a better rostrum than the plinth of Nelson's Column; but that was all possible on account of the work done in the preceding five years. Theoretical Socialism needed bringing from the study towards the practical in the municipalities and the State. John Burns and his friends did this by exploiting the events of those years and turning the attention of the working classes in

the direction of improvement on socialistic lines. Since then it has been more clear to political parties than it ever was before that, to use Burns' words in his speech at the Old Bailey in 1888, Liberal, Tory, and Radical are only successful in their appeals to the people in so far as their programmes are socialistic in fact and tendency. It is since then that the sentence, "We are all Socialists now," has become a commonplace. True, there is still a long distance to be traversed before the majority, even of the working classes, will become converted to as thorough-going an application of socialistic principles as Burns preached. He believes the ultimate aims of Socialism will be accepted by all, and it is only a matter of time and education. That may be so or not, but at any rate Burns made intelligible to them what Socialism is, what its

aims are, and what are the methods that have most promise of success in carrying it out, in whatever degree it may be considered desirable to carry it. As his speech at the Old Bailey is a statement of the general principles of which all his subsequent election addresses and speeches in Parliament and on the Council have been applications, we may close this chapter by a few paragraphs from its peroration. "Now, what is this Socialism of which so much is heard and feared?" he asked. His answers are: "It is a theory of society which advocates a more just, orderly, and harmonious arrangement of the social relations of mankind than that which now prevails. Substituting the principle of association for that of competition in every branch of production and distribution, Socialism proposes to abolish the system of wage slavery, and establish instead governmental

municipal co-operation, securing to every honest worker the full value of his labour, partly in personal remuneration and partly in social and public benefits, such as education and recreation, sustenance and care in old age, not as a charity, but as a debt that society owes to every useful citizen. . . . Socialism proposes that machinery shall do the world's work, and that the whole people shall own such machinery, and reap the benefits individually and collectively, not as at present, when machinery is used by its owners to degrade the human machines who work them, and throw themselves out of work. Socialism proposes that the principles embodied in municipalities owning for the people the tramways, gas and water works, and the State owning the post-office, telegraphs, parcels post, savings and deposit banks, insurance

departments, etc., should be extended to all monopolies that in the hands of individuals are a curse, but owned collectively a blessing. The 'State,' whose duty it is to carry on the development, is a unity of citizens co-operating, and by such co-operation increasing a thousand times the strength of all individuals comprised in it, and giving them a power that would not be at their disposal as individuals when competing against each other. Its political expression would be a convention of labour delegates elected by universal adult suffrages." We have no criticism to offer on this programme. Our only consideration here is, that it was and is John Burns' programme, adopted in sincerity as the result of much reading and thinking and experience of life amongst the very classes who were groping blindly for a solution of the problem of poverty, because it

was their problem in a sense that it could not be to other classes. To John Burns, Socialism offers this solution, and it is at least a philosophy, and not the scrappy collection of odds and ends that furnishes forth most politicians. Instinct had led him to become a labour leader; Socialism provided him with a programme, and his good fortune and good sense enabled him not long after the Old Bailey trial and Pentonville to enter upon a further phase of his career, in which he proceeded, as he has said, "to put into bricks and mortar" the ideas that he had preached as an agitator.

CHAPTER IV.

Twelve Years of Crowded Life: as County Councillor, as the Dock Strike Leader, and as Member of Parliament.

THE year in which John Burns came out of prison was the year in which the elections for the first London County Council took place. His welcome from prison, with enthusiastic demonstrations, being over, he returned to his twofold work of making his own living at the engineering trade and to his propaganda on behalf of unionism and practical Socialism. With his election to the County Council that impossible life, to any man who has not the physique and vigour of John Burns, ceased, and by a fund subscribed for by the working men of Battersea he was enabled to live in lordly ease on two guineas a week, only needing to work for fourteen or fifteen

hours a day at labour more exhausting than engineering. As we are mentioning this matter of payment for services rendered, we may as well state that this sum continued to be all that Burns received until 1892, when the same constituents whom he represented municipally raised a fund of £5 a week in order to enable him to represent them in Parliament. With all the extra inevitable expenses of a member of Parliament and Councillor doing Burns' work, such as heavy correspondence and travelling, the balance remaining for himself and his household would not be more than half his salary. That is a sum that would hardly excite the cupidity of an ordinary skilled artisan.

The new Council met in 1889, and from the first moment the name of John Burns began to be the symbol of the new municipal activities, and a centre of the enthusiasm or the hate

that they evoked from diverse parties. There was a remarkable collection of able and notable men on the Council, taken from all grades and divisions of political and social life. Lord Rosebery was the chairman, and one of the facts that most struck the popular imagination was the close association that bore the appearance of affectionate friendship between the Scottish Peer and his compatriot the Scottish engineer. The English public recognised the personal charm which, though so variedly manifested, accounts for the interest they have both from that day to this continued to excite. If Lord Rosebery was then on his trial, John Burns was making an experiment more important even than the making of such a career as was naturally the destiny of a man with Lord Rosebery's ambitions and possibilities. Working-class leadership, the ability, knowledge,

and honesty of working-class leaders, were of inestimable importance to the future of those classes, and if John Burns broke down in his new sphere of action, with him would go many of the hopes of the competency of Labour to work out its own aims by its own instruments. Whatever other men had gone to the Council for—personal ambition, preparatory training for wider political life, with intention to obstruct the progress of the civic reform which was expected from the Council, or with the enthusiasm that their prospective reform had inspired—Burns had gone there above all to carry Socialism into the midst of it. Other men might be amateurs in their work for the Council; he was the man paid for doing his work, and his heart was in it.

There were two directions in which he looked: first, to the breaking down of the monopolies of the companies

—gas companies, water companies, tramway companies, omnibus services, markets, docks, electric lighting, and their municipalisation—a first step in municipal Socialism which some of the chief towns in England had taken. A further step would be the organisation of industry and distribution, especially of those departments dealing with the necessities of life. We may say at once that in those respects Burns has seen comparatively little results from the Council's labours or his own. But in the other direction in which he looked he had remarkable success. He was the only Labour member on the Council, and he was entrusted with the direction of its labour policy in regard to its own servants, and the terms on which its work should be done either by itself or contractors. At a debate at Toynbee Hall, when suspicion was thrown on the value of his labours by

the classes whose welfare he has done so much for, Alderman Herre said—“As a banker I would say that John Burns’ services to London and labour in this country are worth three million pounds a year.” What he meant may be shown by selecting a few items from the immense number of changes which Burns brought about. It was he who drafted the series of proposals adopted by the Council which resulted in March, 1899, in the policy that all tenders for contracts should contain a declaration to pay such rate of wages and observe such hours of labour as are generally accepted as fair in their trade. Subsequently, as the result of immense labour on committees and wherever he could bring influence to bear, he secured trade union wages in all branches of the Council’s work; sub-letting and sub-contracting were abolished; hours of labour were

reduced from 68 to 54 or 48; overtime was abolished; and a large extension was made of direct labour by the Council in many of their departments. The Works department of the Council especially represents the policy which is due above all to Burns' efforts. But we are not writing a history of the London County Council, which would be necessary if we were to attempt to create a sufficient impression of the work Burns has done upon it. We must mention, however, that most of the principles of his labour policy have been adopted by local authorities in the United Kingdom, and where they have done so it has been to Burns that they have applied for advice and assistance. It is in his unobtrusive way that most of Burns' work has been done. With all his fine gifts of speech he does not love to hear himself talk. He has served on an

enormous number of committees of the Council. For nine years he had an average of one for every day of the year except Sunday, making in all 3000 attendances; and he attended, in addition, endless sub-committees not recorded. But in most cases he did not move the resolutions which owed their origin to him. He has always preferred to be king-maker rather than king. As he has said in an election address, the work done by him was so detailed, so persistent, and so absorbing, that it defies expression, baffles description. As work of this kind often does, it made Burns an enthusiast for the object of his devotion. He will quote of those early days—

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven.

When, later, he entered Parliament, and saw the inefficiency of that body in

transacting business, and the great need of administrative supervision, it was to the County Council that his mind reverted for a model. In his parliamentary address of last year he said that the supervision by committees of the House of Commons, composed of able, experienced, and disinterested men, irrespective of their party politics, is the only way by which the taxpayer can get value for his money, the official justice, and the country that publicity that always makes for good government and efficient administration. Under this system a society clique could no longer dominate the War Office; merit, experience, competency, and courage would count for promotion; and the non-commissioned officer would have his opportunity, the rank and file that proper treatment which modern conditions demand, and must be

conceded, if a voluntary army is to be maintained.

As a municipal statesman, then, John Burns achieved a triumphant success as far as the times and conditions in which he worked allowed. It would really be difficult to exaggerate the effect his personality, his speeches, his principles, his zeal and vigour had in shaping the course taken by the Council in its early years, and in determining the direction it was to take for the future. We cannot dwell on other people's work, and of course Burns is only one man ; but what we are entitled to insist on is, that much of the new spirit of the Council had been brought in from the street by John Burns ; that he was a unique force in an assembly which, without him, would have lacked much of the impetus he gave to it. If he had been a mere windy demagogue and not a man of solid abilities ; if he

had not had knowledge; if his manners had not enabled him to mix as a man of the world with men of the world; if his speech had been uncouth, or he had lost in the strife with difficulties and poverty his good temper; if he had become soured, morose, irreconcilable, fierce, snarling, and altogether socially impossible, then he would have stultified and ruined his own cause, and the London County Council would have known him no more after 1892, nor the House of Commons in 1895 and since; and both assemblies, and the people whose interests he has served there with single aim, would have had to trust to imagination for an ideal of working-class representation, which John Burns has come very near realising.

In August, 1889, began what is still looked on as the most significant and important struggle between workmen

and their employers that had ever taken place. It seemed as if in that year the labour distresses of the last five years had come to a head, and the Dockers represented in their persons and quarrel with the companies that very cause of the unemployed with which Burns had become identified. For they were a disorganised and a too numerous mass, struggling in fierce competition for casual labour, paid at low rates for long hours, and constantly on the verge of starvation through the uncertainty of their employment. If anything could be done for them there was hope for other classes. Unionism and strikes were the resources of the higher classes of workpeople. Could that method be applied to the Dockers? That was the question Burns had to answer when he was called to direct the strike that the Dockers had at last resolved upon. We have already

mentioned Burns' work amongst them ; his attempts to rouse this "forlorn army of labour." In this exceptional case he had set himself deliberately to make them revolt. In other cases he had never urged strikes, and his assistance was only given to men who had taken their resolution independently of him. In his view strikes are a hateful necessity of the industrial competition which Socialism would abolish. He says—"There are moments in every strike when one asks if it be really worth while—if it be not better that the labourer should be let alone to take his accustomed dole, and eke it out from day to day as he had been used to do. This is a foolish sentiment, which half an hour of cool reflection disposes of. Every faith must have its martyrs, and every victory its slain." Another characteristic thought of Burns' comes out in certain remarks on the

moral characteristics of the Dockers. He says the Dockers were neither degraded nor loafers. "There is no 'strike' in the loafer. It is a fool's mission to preach revolt to him. It is the task of the Priests of Baal trying to call down fire from heaven; of Don Quixote seeking to make a Knight Errant of Sancho Panza. The coals we blew upon were working men, oppressed and beaten down, but working men still who had it in them to struggle and to fight for their daily bread. Is it the loafer by trade, do you think, who is willing to shiver for hours under the dock gates in the black gelidity of a December morning for the chance of a shilling's worth of work, and work that needs as much muscle as will? I have seen dock hands fighting for the gates like people tussling in the passages of a burning theatre; the fierce physical energy

(moral inspiration apart) which the chronic loafer, even if he would, is powerless to exert."

It is easy to conceive with such a case, and an advocate who could speak for them in language like that just quoted, that public sympathy, if it were possible to rouse it at all, would be stirred up on behalf of the Dockers. In fact, never before or since did the outside public follow a labour contest with such intense interest. It seemed like the challenge of the labour market to capitalism throughout the world. This partly accounted for the support the strike received, and also for the deep hostility it aroused amongst the classes, who saw in it a conspiracy financed by revolutionaries and foreign Socialists. Enormous subscriptions came in all through the summer, till the strike ended in October with the submission of the Dock Companies to the

demands of the "Dockers' Tanner," and the reorganisation of labour in the docks under such conditions of hours and terms of regular employment as put an end to casual employment and gave the men a substantial position. Burns and his friends—Mr. Ben Tillett and Mr. Champion—in short, achieved for them what Burns had already achieved for the employés of the County Council. During that time food had to be found for 250,000 persons every day. No difficulty arose about money; but the organisation of the relief was a mighty task, undertaken by committees which sat day and night. "Had ours been a Mansion House appeal," said Burns, "on behalf of the sufferers by some sudden great disaster at home or abroad, it could not have been responded to with more extravagant generosity." Australia alone sent £25,000. As to the "foreign

Socialist" contributions, he says they did not exceed £100. Most remarkable of all, when we recollect the scenes in Piccadilly and Trafalgar Square, the strike began and ended without disorder. That was the pride alike of Cardinal Manning (who ultimately acted as mediator in the quarrel) and of Burns. The latter said he had been in the thick of starving men, with hundreds of pounds about him (they knowing it), and not a penny had he lost. He had sent men whom he did not know for change for a gold piece, and had never been cheated of a penny; nor through all the weeks had he ever been asked for drink money.

It would be impossible here to say more about Burns and this great strike, in which he was the most conspicuous figure, except that he henceforth became the undisputed chief of that socialistic trade unionism known as the New

Unionism, which for some years carried dismay into the ranks of the older societies, as the records of the Trades Union Congress show, and has very considerably affected their action towards political questions. We can only mention that Burns' connection with the Congresses, of which he had been a member of the Parliamentary Committee, ceased in 1895 when at Cardiff he carried the self-denying ordinance by which all persons not engaged in wage labour were excluded from the Congress. In the previous year he had been sent by the Congress to visit the American Trade Unionists. He has no words strong enough to express his abhorrence of American plutocracy and the corruption of municipal life there ; and his description of Chicago as "a pocket edition of hell" is a phrase that even he, with all his energy of expression, would have

some difficulty in making more vigorous.

About three years after the Dock Strike his Battersea supporters sent him with all the prestige of his labour leadership and of his work on the County Council to represent them in Parliament. That was in 1892. Again, in 1895, he was returned; and for the third time to the Parliament that met on 3rd December, 1900. What was, on this last occasion, a narrow escape from losing the seat was due to the uncompromising hostility which he has shown to the Government in their management of South African affairs since the troubles began. Capitalism appears to him incarnate in the person of Mr. Cecil Rhodes, and Mr. Chamberlain is his "pliant instrument." It is unnecessary to describe what speeches a man like John Burns would make who holds these opinions.

Battersea was not less enthusiastic for the war than were most other constituencies, but Burns claims that, though five months before the election he would have lost his seat from that cause, yet when he got to his constituents, and began to speak to them from the local platforms, he converted a majority of enemies into a majority of friends. To describe Burns, however, as a "Little Englander" would be more absurd than the usual absurdity of that vulgar reproach. In a long conversation that he had with Mr. Cecil Rhodes, the latter said—"Well, Mr. Burns, I am surprised to find you are not a Little Englander; but I don't know what you would do with me if you had me in your power." "Oh," replied Burns, "I can easily tell you that. I would put you with your back against a wall and fill you up with lead!"

Burns' career in Parliament has been marked by all the qualities which he displayed in other scenes, but he has not had the special opportunities of distinction that the County Council afforded him. Personally, he has been more than usually successful as a speaker, and one might say that he is even a distinguished member of the House, as he certainly is one of the most popular ; but he has been hampered, as all private members are, by the tendency of legislative initiative to fall more and more into the hands of the Government. If he has not had the opportunity, as he had on the County Council, of showing his great abilities as an administrator, and the talents that the municipal revolution in London called forth, he has yet carried on strenuously the work that was then begun. He did not go into Parliament with the intention of turning

political events to account for the purpose of personal ambition, but to work at a certain programme of economical questions as the representative of the interests of the working classes. Hence we do not think of John Burns as a politician using the ordinary political artifices that lead to personal success. To that duty of his he has been faithful, and he has lent his powerful aid or set his equally powerful opposition against all proposals which make for or are contrary to the ideals of which we have spoken. It would be too long a story to go through his speeches in the House to illustrate this, but let us take one of last year's to show what influence on countless subjects Burns exercises over legislation.

The occasion was the consideration of the London Water Bill for purchasing the companies and bringing water from Wales. We take the

account from the *Manchester Guardian* of March last. "In the impatient House rose Mr. John Burns to plead for London. . . . His sentences are not well rounded, but every now and again an epigram flashes out on you like the lightning from a cloud. The hum of the House ceases and all are still. And then in blow after blow came the sledge-hammer sentences, rugged, rough-hewn, and often unjoined, but always genuine, asserting, original, true. There is a touch of Walt Whitman in the free strength of the phrases, of Cobbett in the boldness of the passionate advocacy. You will say that he draws from deep wells of strength, and the House of Commons in spite of itself is held riveted, enthralled. . . . He sweeps aside the sophistry and cunning of self-interest: he stated the people's case. 'We want our water from cloudland,' he cried,

‘and not from a vast sewage-infected area. You will not remedy this evil until you have an epidemic in the West-End, just as you did not put down garrotting until a member of the House was garrotted at the Duke of York’s Column.’ ”

This is an admirable account of his power and position in the House, and of his eloquence. A member like him is far from being an ordinary member, and Mr. Chamberlain’s recent sneer at Labour members loses its point if directed at John Burns.

We can hardly close even this imperfect sketch without mentioning some of the items of Burns’ political creed which belong to more general politics. He has a clever phrase about the legislation of the present Government: “It has passed labels and called them Acts of Parliament.” Here are some of John Burns’

“labels” which have not been passed, but which have figured steadily in his election addresses from the first:—Home Rule for Ireland; Payment of Members and Election Expenses; Adult Man and Woman Suffrage, with Electoral Reform; Triennial Parliaments; Abolition of the House of Lords; Disestablishment of the Church; Old Age Pensions (“The Government’s abandonment of Old Age Pensions is a cruel betrayal of the veterans of industry—a treachery to the thrifty, a cowardly desertion of the weak”); Direct Veto and Local Option.

John Burns is now a man of only forty-two years of age, and he is in his third Parliament. We wonder when, how, and by whom, and what age Burns will be before this programme is accomplished; not to mention that further developed Socialism which is in the background. But that

he will do his full share towards it, and have a fine record at the end, there is no doubt.

CHAPTER V.

Review and Forecast : What will Burns Do Next?—The Needs of the Radicals —Burns a Possible Leader.

WHAT impresses us most when we think quietly over the career of John Burns is, that it is a record of accomplishment in the art of leadership and the achievement of a practical programme to which there is no parallel in the England of this generation, with the exception of the career of Mr. Chamberlain. It seems also that we ought to consider that we are not speaking of a career which is closed, but of one not more than in midway.

The interest we feel in a man of forty-two, who has already done great things, is in speculating on what he will do next. If he were a politician of independent means, either an

ambitious manufacturer or a member of any of those families who take to politics as a profession, and had succeeded during his eight years of parliamentary life in impressing upon his party and the country—as in fact he has done—the consciousness of his rare gifts for public affairs, there would be no limit to the possibilities that his future would afford.

Naturally he would come to the front as the leader of his party. Taken just as he is, he is qualified to head any party contemplating radical changes in the conditions of social and political life. It is ridiculous to suppose otherwise, knowing what he is as a speaker either arousing enthusiasm and passion on the platform, or deliberating on committees, or in the municipal council, or in Parliament. Suppose we descend to details. He is as well read and learned in the ordinary scholastic sense as some

men of this generation who at the Bar have made £10,000 a year, and in the sense of a wide acquaintance with the literature and learning that statesmen should have, incomparably more learned. Let anyone glance round his library at Lavender Hill and talk to him of books, pictures, music, architecture, the sciences and the arts, with which the ordinary "well-educated" person is extremely imperfectly acquainted. His conversation will charm you on such subjects, and if you are a university man you will leave him somewhat out of conceit with yourself, and with none of that self-complacency that the academically trained man so often feels in contemplating the "self-educated" man.

There could be no greater mistake than to have the notion that Burns is "rather a good fellow for a working man, don't-you-know, very intelligent, a good specimen of his class, shows

what mechanics' institutes and night schools can do for serious young working men," and so on. A man of Burns' type is neither turned out by mechanics' institutes nor by the university. Carlyle, in speaking of Robert Burns' social success in the learned society of Edinburgh, said the philosophers were considerably astonished to find that he could talk to them about the "association of ideas" and of a great many other things that they themselves were not so well acquainted with. The best head in England, further said Carlyle, and they could do nothing more than make an exciseman of him. We confess there is some difficulty in knowing what the Tory Party could have done more with satisfactory results to themselves for the revolutionary Robert Burns; but in days when a Radical Party, if it has a programme, has no man of sufficient ability and character

to lead them, it does seem that they might manage to make more use of the most able man in their ranks than they have hitherto done. They need not be ashamed of such a leader; but the truth is, they are as conventional in their ideas as if they were Conservatives, or Liberal-Unionists, or Imperialists, or old Liberals, or any other variety of multi-hued Liberalism, and they will not be happy unless they can follow a "gentleman," a baronet, or at least a university man. John Burns knows better than any man the snobbery of the working classes and the snobbery of Radicals, and he knows that it is they that always stand as an obstruction in the way of such men as he is, unless their lot happens to be cast in times when society is being revolutionised by extraordinary methods. Then they come to the front—they get their chance, because

the conventionalities have had to give way and everybody wants a man who can lead.

It is when new things have been on foot that Burns, as we have seen, has had what chances have happened to him, and he has come to the front by virtue of his own strength. The Radical programme is at a stand because Radicals are expecting impossible co-operation from official Liberalism, or it may be even because there is no Radical programme and very few Radicals. But granting the existence of both, we cannot conceive that either would be better suited than with John Burns as exponent and leader. He is ideal. We have dwelt on his personal qualifications; and there is no doubt of his Radicalism. The danger of Radicalism when a rich demagogue leads it is that it will be sold at the point where the rich man's interest and Radicalism conflict.

John Burns has so shaped and ordered his life, or it has been so shaped and ordered, that he is inconceivable as a parvenu aspiring to change his social status. What lies beyond his Radicalism is not a social vista in which he sees himself a member of a privileged class as the reward of his ambition, but a vista of Socialism more levelling than even Radicals may care for. That may prejudice them against Burns' leadership; yet his Socialism, from his point of view, would be no obstacle, for many items of the Radical programme would be taken naturally in the stride of the Socialist leader, and Burns has acted with the Radicals. Some Conservatives have views of Socialism that they believe can be accomplished by means of the Conservative Party. When Burns has seen proposals by them that were consistent with his views he has supported them—the

Workmen's Compensation Act, for example. But the Radical programme is, as far as it goes, the programme of Burns. Radicals are to be found, if anywhere, amongst the working classes, and Socialists, as John Burns understands them, are also to be found there; and who is there of all public men to-day who so understands working men as John Burns does? Our fear is that the working men do not sufficiently understand John Burns. If it were not for their snobbery and timidity and suspicion, the prejudices they have against the leadership of men of their own class, they would see in him something more than a strike leader and expert on labour questions, and hail him as their natural party leader. Since the days of Gladstone, Cobden, and Bright they have had none to stir their enthusiasm so much, nor who would be so capable of doing it, if only he

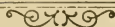
were as much their social as he is their intellectual superior ; if only he carried on a big business and had made a big fortune.

It is not the hate of the classes to which he is opposed that makes the hindrances to the further step in John Burns' career which we should be interested in seeing him take, but the non-appreciation of his greater qualities that his friends are too unintelligent to understand. Suspicion of personal motives on the part of a man of their own class aspiring to take part in public life has always been a characteristic of the working classes. They resent a superiority which has no hereditary claims. As long as John Burns is in public life he will do useful work, he will shrink from no drudgery ; but we hope that circumstances, and his own talents and ambition, will yet open up a way to higher

distinction than he has yet achieved ; and our estimate of him is very much astray if he does not in the future, as he has done in the past, create his own chances.



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